

Fairbury's First Murder Case

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Since the first settler, Valentine Darnall, arrived south of town in 1829, there have been only eight murder cases in Fairbury's 190-year-old history. The first murder case was Ida Mae Steers in 1896.

The Steers, Darnall, and Travis families were among the early pioneers to settle in the Fairbury area. They primarily settled on land that was south of Fairbury. John G. Steers married Mary Ann Travis. They had eleven children. Their youngest child was Ida Mae Steers. She was born in 1878.

The parents of Charles Burrell were John Burrell and Permelia A. Donaho. They had three boys named Ulysses, Charles, and Arthur. Charles was born in 1870 in the Arcade Block in Fairbury. Today, this is the area around the Fairbury water tower.

By 1880, Permelia was living separately from her husband. In the Census, she and her three sons were living with her parents, Jefferson and Eliza Donaho.

The July 1889 Pantagraph published a story about Charles Burrell severely mistreating a pony. Charles traveled from his home south of Fairbury to Pontiac. He traded his pony for another pony in Pontiac. After Charles got his new pony home, he became dissatisfied with his new pony and decided to trade it back in Pontiac. When he was about two miles away from Pontiac, he became enraged at his new pony. Charles severely beat the defenseless creature. He broke one of its legs in two places, broke three of its ribs, and knocked out one eye. He took off the saddle and walked away leaving the pony to suffer. The Humane Society of Pontiac had the horse shot and disposed of. An arrest warrant was issued for Charles, but he fled by train to Missouri, where his father lived.

In 1893, the father of Ida Mae Steers passed away. Ida was only fourteen years old when her father died. After her father died, Ida went to live with her brother, Bert Steers. His farm was in Belle Prairie township, at the head of Indian Grove, about seven miles south of Fairbury.

In December of 1895, Charles Burrell joined the family of Bert Steers as his hired hand. In the Spring of 1896, Charles was twenty-six years old. During March and April, he attempted to court the seventeen-year-old Ida Mae Steers. She was young in appearance for her age.

Ida did not believe she was in a serious relationship with Charles Burrell, but he thought differently. His passion for Miss Steers grew rapidly and finally became distasteful to her. Ida informed Charles their affair had gone far enough. She refused to take a buggy ride with him in May of 1896. Her refusal excited him considerably. At this point, Ida was only a few weeks away from her eighteenth birthday.

The next day after being told the affair was over, Charles gained another interview with Ida. He proposed marriage to Ida and wanted her to elope with him immediately. She

declined his marriage offer. She told Charles that her people had always been kind to her and she would not treat them so disrespectfully now by eloping.

Charles became very much excited and made threats that he would make trouble for her and her family. That evening, he asked Bert Steers to get another hired hand. Charles told him that Ida had refused to marry him and that under the circumstances, he could not stay.

The next day, Mr. Steers went to Fairbury to search for a new hired hand. When he returned home, Charles Burrell told Mr. Steers that he had changed his mind, and would like to remain his hired hand. Bert Steers told Burrell he had better quit as he had first desired to. Mr. Steers paid him his final salary.

The next morning, Wednesday, Burrell helped do the chores. He then went to his room and put on his best clothes, but he forgot to take his trunk. When Mr. Steers requested that Charles Burrell take his trunk with him, he replied that he would not because he never expected to work anymore. Charles Burrell then got in his buggy and drove away.

Meantime, Miss Steers had become uneasy on account of Burrell's threats and had gone to stay with her sister, Mrs. John Masterson, who lived on a farm belonging to M. M. Travis about a mile southeast. She had decided to go on Monday, but the persuasiveness of Mrs. Steers kept her until Tuesday noon. She was evidently afraid of Burrell, but her fears were not apparently shared by the family.

Upon leaving the Steers farm, Burrell went east to Henry Darnall's where he was acquainted. He went in and bade the family good-bye, saying he was going away. Burrell said there was some of his money in the hands of Mapel Bros. at Fairbury. He requested Mr. Darnall to get it after he got settled and send it to him. He probably went from there to Masterson's where he arrived at about six o'clock. Ida saw him coming and did not wish to see him.

When Miss Steers saw Burrell driving up, she told her sister, Mrs. Masterson, that she did not wish to see him. She went into the parlor which Mr. Masterson was sitting and told him that Burrell was coming and that she did not want to see him.

Mr. Masterson, however, advised her that it would be better to see him and have a quiet talk with him. If she did this, maybe he would not bother her anymore. He then stepped out into the sitting room.

Burrell knocked at the west door and was admitted into the sitting room by Mr. Masterson. He said "good morning" and asked if Ida was in the house. Being told she was, he asked to see her. Mrs. Masterson said she was in the parlor and Burrell opened the door and walked in, leaving the door open. Burrell immediately walked to where Ida was standing at the north end of the room. He placed his left hand on her shoulder and asked if she would "go with him." She answered "no sir" with considerable emphasis.

He immediately drew a revolver and placing it almost against her left breast, fired. The ball entered Ida's body near her heart. The ball fractured her fourth rib.

Burrell immediately stepped back a few feet, and turning the weapon on himself, pulled the trigger. The ball entered his breast, and he fell to the floor and died in a few minutes.

Mrs. Masterson, who was in the sitting room, facing the east door, saw the flash of the first shot. Both Mr. and Mrs. Masterson saw the second shot and rushed into the room. Ida Mae Steers screamed and held up both hands, but did not fall, and was supported by Mr. Masterson outside the house, where she was laid on a couch in the open air. Dr. Parsons was summoned from Fairbury, to take charge of Miss Steers' care.

Ida Mae Steers suffered four days before she passed away. She is buried in the small Cooper Cemetery, southwest of Fairbury. She was seventeen years and eleven months old.

An inquest determined Charles Burrell came to his death by a pistol shot in his own hands in a fit of insanity. His body was removed to the residence of his aunt Mrs. Jarvil White, three and one-half miles south of town where the funeral was held Thursday. The burial location for Charles Burrell is unknown.

The murder of 17-year-old Ida Mae Steers seems to be a case where a psychotic man determined that if he could not have her for his bride, then nobody could have her as a bride.



She is buried in Cooper Cemetery about 7 miles southwest of Fairbury.